

USCIRF Annual Report Rollout Events
April 25, 2022, 2:00-3:00 PM ET (General Public—Virtual)

Opening Remarks

CHAIR MAENZA:

Good morning, everyone, and thank you for joining us. I'm Nadine Maenza, chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, or USCIRF. We at USCIRF are dedicated to advocating for international religious freedom—a foundational and essential human right. Today, we are proud to release our 23rd Annual Report, which offers an overview of religious freedom conditions around the world and lays out recommendations to the U.S. government on what it can do to shed light, ensure accountability, and encourage positive change.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. advisory body dedicated to promoting the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad. We monitor religious freedom conditions in foreign countries throughout the year, including through travel—which we have just recently resumed, following the loosening of pandemic-related restrictions.

I am now honored to introduce the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, who will offer brief remarks on the occasion of the release of our annual report today.

Thank you, Speaker Pelosi, for those kind words.

I'm also honored to introduce Senator Marco Rubio, a senior member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, who will offer some remarks as well.

Thank you, Senator Rubio.

Under our mandate in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, or IRFA, we issue a report by May 1st each year, with recommendations to the president, secretary of state, and Congress.

All chapters in the report are approved by a majority vote and reflect the views of a bipartisan group of Commissioners from different religious, political, and professional backgrounds.

Key findings, recommendations, and analysis for each country chapter represent insights and information gained through USCIRF hearings, factfinding trips, research, and meetings with government officials, human rights advocates, and religious leaders.

We invite those with questions to use the Q&A feature on the bottom of your screen to submit a question in writing. You may post these questions at any time, and we will respond to as many questions as possible following our overview of the highlights from this year's report.

Before moving into the content of this year's Annual Report, I'd like to take a moment to thank our professional staff for their phenomenal work in preparing it and in organizing this event. Each Annual Report is the culmination of a team effort involving each member of USCIRF's staff in addition to our outside

copyeditor and report designers. Their combined effort made today's release possible.

The Annual Report's primary focus is on two groups of countries: those that USCIRF recommends the State Department designate as Countries of Particular Concern, or CPCs; and those that USCIRF recommends the State Department place on its Special Watch List, or SWL.

Under IRFA, CPCs are countries whose governments engage in or tolerate "systematic, ongoing, [and] egregious" violations of religious freedom. The SWL is for countries where the violations meet two, but not all three, of the systematic, ongoing, egregious test for CPC status.

This year, our report covers 27 countries. Based on 2021 conditions, we recommend 15 of these countries for CPC status, including the 10 that the State Department designated as CPCs in December 2021: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. In addition, USCIRF believes that the State Department should designate five other countries as CPCs: Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, Syria, and Vietnam.

We recommend that the State Department maintain on its Special Watch List three countries—Algeria, Cuba, and Nicaragua—and add 9 countries to that list: Azerbaijan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Turkey, and Uzbekistan.

In addition, we also recommend for redesignation as Entities of Particular Concern, or EPCs, the following seven nonstate actors: al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, the

Houthis, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, Islamic State in West Africa Province (also referred to as ISIS-West Africa), and Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin. To meet the legal standard for designation as an EPC, a nonstate group must engage in particularly severe violations of religious freedom, be “outside the control of a sovereign government,” exercise “significant political power and territorial control,” and often employ “violence in pursuit of its objectives.”

My fellow Commissioners and I will discuss USCIRF’s key findings and recommendations on some of these other countries in more detail.

The cover of our report features images from Afghanistan because religious freedom conditions there went into an immediate and disastrous downward spiral following the full U.S. withdrawal in August 2021 and immediate takeover by the Taliban. While we had long been concerned about conditions in Afghanistan, the Taliban’s return to power has had an immediate chilling impact on religious freedom and the broader human rights environment.

Given this precipitous decline in 2021, USCIRF has taken the step of recommending in this year’s Annual Report that the State Department designate Afghanistan under the Taliban as a “country of particular concern,” or CPC, under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. USCIRF’s last such recommendation was 21 years ago, in 2001—just before the ousting of the previous Taliban regime, which had controlled most of the country since 1996.

In addition to Afghanistan, three countries in sub-Saharan Africa have given us cause for alarm based on shifting circumstances in 2021.

First, we had removed the Central Africa Republic, or CAR, from last year's annual report following improvements in religious freedom conditions in 2020. However, during 2021, Central African authorities and their partners committed egregious and ongoing violations of religious freedom—including targeted abductions, torture, and killings of Muslims—which led us to reinstate our recommendation that the State Department place CAR on the Special Watch List.

We are also continuing to draw attention to the dire circumstances in Nigeria. The State Department had rightly designated Nigeria as a CPC in 2020 for the first time, an action USCIRF has recommended every year since 2009. But in 2021, the State Department chose not to redesignate Nigeria as a CPC, and it bypassed downgrading the country to the SWL, thereby indicating that, in its view, Nigeria is a country with no severe religious freedom violations as defined by IRFA. In fact, central government failure, state-level government repression, and religiously-motivated violence by non-state actors have turned parts of Nigeria, which is Africa's most populous country of approximately 211 million, into a hotbed of persecution—particularly in the north. Earlier this month, for example, a court in Kano State sentenced humanist leader Mubarak Bala to 24 years in prison for peacefully expressing beliefs that the Nigerian government considers blasphemous. USCIRF maintains that it should again return to CPC status in 2022.

In addition, USCIRF is deeply concerned about the potential for backsliding in Sudan, which we previously removed from our annual report due to its dramatic religious freedom improvements since 2019. However, the October 2021 military takeover now threatens many of those advancements. USCIRF is closely monitoring the situation.

These countries represent just a sampling of the places in which religious freedom continues to face severe challenges around the world, and I hope that each of you will take the opportunity to read the full report. Those challenges, after all, are many, and they affect individuals, families, and communities around the world.

The scope and scale of the violations are disheartening, of course. But for our part at USCIRF, they drive our determination to remain steadfast in our commitment to unflinchingly advocate for the essential right of religious freedom in every corner of the globe.

I'd now like to turn to Vice Chair Nury Turkel, who will discuss the implementation in 2021 of some of our previous recommendations, in addition to ongoing efforts to address international religious freedom by the administration of President Joseph R. Biden during 2021, its first year in office.